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REICHSWEHR

BY

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

REICHSWEHR

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Reichswehr, the post-world War I German Army of 100,000 mandated by the Treaty of Versailles, was a very capable, highly professional army of leaders - a "Führerarmee". It served Germany well from 1919 to 1933 and became the cadre around which the highly effective Wehrmacht was to form. Examination of available English language literature is used to illustrate the little known Reichswehr's organization, policies, culture, training, and covert rearmament. The development of officers, and most especially those candidates for the General Staff, is a model of pure excellence uncommon in its intellectual demands and professional commitment. Likewise, the Reichswehr was able to recruit some of the best of the nation's youth and to offer them careers full of meaningful military and trade schooling. This alone is a characteristic rare among the peacetime armies of history. The American Army, faced with frequent cycles of public neglect, can learn from the example of the Reichswehr.

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REICHSWEHR

"Reichswehr" - the 100,000 man Army of a defeated Germany - is today almost forgotten. But it was a very special Army, father to Hitler's "Wehrmacht". It was an Army of Excellence. The Reichswehr of the 1920's offers a useful insight, in part, for the American Army of 1986, rebuilding from the trauma and neglect of the Viet Nam era. The period 1918 to Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was marked by great secrecy. Civil and military leaders strove to maintain a veil of secrecy over all military and naval affairs. The western democracies, concerned with the popular political and economic issues of the times, did not want to hear the *whispered warnings of their attaches in Berlin*. People weren't interested in the obscurities of the German Army, the press therefore wasn't interested (there were expose's in the world press but generally the subject was ignored), political leadership lacked moral courage and wisdom, and the Germans liked it that way. Little was written of the Reichswehr. There was and remains an informal conspiracy of silence.

The victorious Allies of 1918 were determined to deny Germany the means to again wage war against them. The Treaty of Versailles, ratified by Germany in 1920 literally at bayonet point, denied the German Army an offensive military capability and the essential institutions of a modern, major power. The Treaty set severe and

specific limits. It minimized mobilization potential by limiting the Reichswehr to a maximum of 4,000 officers committed to 25 year service careers. Enlistments were for 12 years for the 96,000 soldiers. The potential trained manpower pool was thus extremely small as compared to the draftee armies of France and the other European powers. Mass mobilization of a nation - the "Nation in Arms" - was the basis of military power at the time. The mass army was built upon an annual call up of an entire year group for a relatively brief few months to a year or so of training and subsequent return to civilian life as members of the military reserve. This was the World War I model of the European Great Powers. According to the military wisdom of the day, a long service, professional army could serve only internal security and border control functions. The Allies then struck at those institutions that had been the foundations of Prussian military excellence since the time of Napoleon. The German Great General Staff was abolished as was its principal institution of higher learning, the Kriegsakademie. This provision sought to destroy the feared, yet respected, Prussian General Staff which had so successfully waged war since the time of the elder Moltke. Thus the Allies determined to eliminate the German modern, military "professional" as we understand that term today. The seven infantry and three cavalry divisions allowed the Reichswehr were denied tanks, aircraft, and heavy artillery. The bordering countries of France, Poland, Austria and the USSR retained these powerful offensive weapons, of course. The

on-site Allied Control Commission (Revolutionary Russia was not included) monitored compliance even as Allied soldiers occupied a demilitarized zone on the west bank of the Rhine River. The Allies wanted Germany limited to a constabulary army and vulnerable to her neighbors. General von Seeckt, newly appointed head of the postwar Reichswehr, resolved otherwise. He decided to make the most of adversity while evading the Treaty terms and the Commission inspection at every turn.

General Hans von Seeckt, recently returned from war service in Turkey, was an ideal pick for the troubled times. Known to his contemporaries as the "Sphinx," he served from 1920 to 1926 resolved to rebuild the power and prestige of the German Army. Most of what von Seeckt and his fellow officers did was open to the public; some was necessarily obscure and specifically intended to escape the eyes of the Allied Control Commission. Von Seeckt first resolved to make a virtue of necessity and craft a Führerarmee - a "leader's army".² That is, all 100,000 soldiers were to be leaders or capable of leadership. He built his small Army literally from scratch, from the ground up. But this was undoubtably a blessing for he and his officers were able to do so very carefully and efficiently. The Reichswehr was thus structured for maximum current capability while simultaneously investing in the institutions, organizations, traditions, and public support required of a future great power. Von Seeckt farmed out as many functions as possible to governmental and civilian agencies. And at every

opportunity its leaders sought to evade training, structure, and equipment limitations. The Allies became aware of these deceptions over time but lacked the will to challenge them. One observer frankly reported:

"...all their demands for concessions, all their omissions have been from the beginning dictated by the design of reconstructing a powerful military force and have been combined in such way that by a simple transformation the Reichswehr may be converted, in the minimum of time, into a great Army of very modern form once the chains of the Treaty, which in spite of all have remained heavy and embarrassing, have been broken." ³

The trick, in other words, was in the cadre and structure.

The postwar Reichswehr attracted a large number of volunteers. It had public support for it both offered employment in uncertain times and was the one institution capable of both coping with domestic instability brought about by domestic assaults from the Left and Right and with defending Reich frontiers from neighboring predations, especially Poland to the east. Fortunately, the end of the World War had cast adrift a tremendous number of experienced and trained, or semi-trained, soldiers. Many others had served in informal and active militias. So a small Reichswehr could pick from the best of the combat proven war veterans, a selection ratio of about one in ten

in the case of officers. Social standing played a role in the selection of officers as well, and a high proportion of the 4,000 chosen were from fine families rich in military tradition and the professions. Only about 200 ensigns a year were needed for such a small officer corps. As part of a revival of Prussian military tradition, fully 67 percent of these officers would come from traditional officers' families. All prospective officers attended a four year precommission course. Obviously Germany would have an extremely talented, if small, army leadership.⁴ Rigorous enlistment standards also guaranteed that the Reichswehr would be manned by intelligent and healthy youth, many combat veterans of the war. Authorized only 96,000 enlisted soldiers, the Army was similarly selective in recruiting for the ranks. The intellectual and social level of the soldiers was high and often approached that of the officers. Many sought enlistment but few could join; the Reichswehr needed only 8000 recruits a year from a nation of 60 million. The less fortunate often joined the large, militarized police forces or one of the many illegal, but secretly sanctioned and supported, paramilitary forces spawned by the troubles of the 1920s. But the Reichswehr got the best.

These soldiers were a far cry from the grey, dumb, plodding mass armies of earlier times and consequently required a more enlightened style of leadership. Likewise, the Reichswehr's leaders had observed at first hand the naval and military mutinies and indiscipline in the ranks common to the period between 1918 and 1920 and resolved to avoid

such incidents in the future. Reichswehr officers looked after their men. Soldiers were well garrisoned, fed, and cared for by experienced and talented officers and noncommissioned officers who had invariably experienced the horrors and suffering of trench warfare. There was a conscious effort to form professional bonds between the leader and the soldier. The transition to a long term voluntary force also brought with it substantive measures to make life more pleasant for the volunteer. Barracks were improved, pay increased, and three new grades were introduced between private and NCO. Many of the minor harrassments of earlier decades were dropped and discipline became more positive than punitive.⁵ The Army also provided for future employment of the long term soldiers by establishing trade schools designed to make retired soldiers qualified foremen and superintendents for private companies. Von Seeckt's goal for his enlisted soldiers was that all men should be able to perform the duties of an NCO and all NCOs with more than ten years of service should be able to serve as lieutenants and captains. The peacetime Army, initially limited to a strength of 100,000, was designed to grow steadily to 300,000 once Germany had recovered and the Allied Occupation terminated. Every soldier thus had to "be all he could be" and the leadership recognized that investment in its human material came first. Later Hitler's insistence on the rapid expansion to an army of more than a million, a move strongly opposed by many professional soldiers, stretched the assimilative capacity of the Army to the breaking

point. Nevertheless, World War II found former privates and NCOs of the old Reichswehr skillfully leading companies and battalions of the Wehrmacht.

Structurally, Germany was broken down into seven Wehrkreis (area commands or districts), subordinate to Eastern and Western Front Headquarters. Thus, four districts in Eastern and Central Germany were under Group Command I, headquartered in Berlin, and three Western districts were under Group Command II, based at Kassel. Each Wehrkreis commanding general was responsible for all military activities within his portion of Germany and simultaneously commanded the infantry division garrisoned within his Wehrkreis. He was thus served by two staffs. The Wehrkreis was designed to expand to a wartime Corps HQ while the two front headquarters became Army Headquarters. The Front Headquarters and Wehrkreis thus had both a geographic peacetime structure and a wartime tactical mission. Units of the army were territorially based and recruited locally. They made conscious efforts to assist the local populace and to strengthen popular interest in and support for the Reichswehr.⁶ Von Seeckt made a point of withdrawing the army from politics. But the new Army was ideologically linked to the old Imperial Army. The names of the old regiments were carried by individual companies in order to keep alive the traditions of the glorious past. The Reichswehr peacetime structure was simple, sound, and expandable. It was, however, an "ALO 1 Army." Units were fully manned, if lightly equipped.

The Versailles Treaty limited Germany to a small army - no reserves permitted. But strong public and private support spawned a variety of paramilitary organizations which contributed greatly to both immediate security requirements and mobilization potential. Von Seeckt and his senior officers arranged for the equipping, training, and direction of many of these formations. Aggressive Polish moves and the internal disturbances fostered by both nationalists and communists were thus met by Army staff directed police battalions and assorted "illegal" militias. Freikorps, heavily armed volunteer infantry formations, formed everywhere to deal with widespread domestic violence and often fought in pitched battles in the city streets. The Grenzschutz Ost ("work command"), nominally a construction engineering work force for Eastern Prussia, formed to keep the Poles at bay. Armaments varied widely, from rifles to artillery, and training and leadership made them effective military formations or rabble. This "Black Reichswehr," prohibited by Treaty, represented mobilization flesh for the bones of the official Reichswehr. These paramilitary formations reached a peak strength of about 400,000 serving soldiers in the earlier postwar years and were known, in many cases, to the Allies, who objected. Nevertheless, many were required in truth for the Reichswehr was simply inadequate to the task of maintaining order and frontier security. Their funding was shared by the Reichswehr and industrial and agrarian organizations to which the

units were assigned. But everywhere the Reichswehr encouraged the formation of military clubs, societies, and organizations designed to foster military spirit, pass on military knowledge, and engage in paramilitary activity. Later this was to include the subsidizing of civilian flying clubs and the development of a strong civil aviation as a screen for remilitarization. As a point of interest, however, the Army felt that those activities which developed a healthy German youth, such as a marching or sports club, had more long term value to them than did the paramilitary organizations. Certainly many of the police organizations looked military. In 1913, for example, 30,000 of 80,000 German police served at the national (Schutzpolizei) rather than local level. In 1920 the police forces had expanded to 150,000 and many were organized and armed as infantry and lived in military barracks.⁷ Trained and generally well led, manned by many war veterans, both militarized police and "illegal" paramilitary forces formations gave body to the country's skeletal military power. The Reichswehr thus served, by structure and example, as the basis of a National Army ably fleshed out by trained and experienced militias.

The Prussian General Staff, fundamental to the demonstrated excellence of German arms, had been banned by the Versailles Treaty. General von Seeckt and his office, the Truppenamt (Troop Office), brought it back to life again in disguise. In this case, he had the example of Scharnhorst and his reconstruction of the Prussian Army following defeat by Napoleon and the limitations of the Treaty of

Paris. The Reichswehr leadership considered this single issue to be more important than all others with which it was faced and consequently studied the problem of officer education thoroughly. Their program focused on those few outstanding officers of superior intellect and potential. Selection was fierce. From 1921 onward all mid-seniority lieutenants took formal examinations for the General Staff. Candidates for the (unofficial) General Staff were examined in the military sciences, history, languages, political science, railways and communications.⁸ Each of the seven Wehrkreis then conducted a two year general staff or "leaders assistants" course. Survivors of these rigorous courses then went to Berlin for their third year of traditional studies. This procedure did not allow for the same degree of effectiveness possible in the prewar army in spite of centralized direction. But it got around the Treaty. Much of what had been accomplished at the Kriegsakademie was now carried out by the divisions. Tactics and military history formed the bulk of initial instruction. Foreign languages were taught and the third year of instruction included politics, economics, and international affairs. Students were detailed to the various arms in the summers to gain insight into the capabilities and potentials of the various arms. There were positions of importance on lesser staffs for those who did not quite complete this full and most rigorous course.⁹ Army leadership was united in its commitment to this effort above all else; a superb general staff was fundamental to a future, and larger, Reichswehr.

General staff training therefore remained highly challenging. In fact it was far too rigorous, for the number successfully completing the entire three year program was miniscule and Germany suffered for lack of sufficient number of qualified officers to direct her massive armies of World War II. At that time, she again found it necessary to resort to the World War I expedient, with some success, of conducting a series of three and four week staff courses emphasizing a combination of academic and practical experience.

Soldiers training was thorough and conducted at company level. Those of like grades and aptitudes were grouped together for individual training into six groups: recruits, elder men of limited capacity, NCO candidates, NCOs, platoon leaders, company leaders. This system proved highly effective in developing each soldier to his highest potential as individuals worked within homogeneous groups. Later the Reichswehr adopted a three year training cycle, focusing on a different branch or weapon (rifle, machinegun, technical training, etc.). Each technical unit (engineer, signal, automotive - a total of 51 units in the early 1920s), and each Wehrkreis organized an industrial type school designed not only for post-service employment but to raise the overall skill levels of Reichswehr cadres. All of this helped to achieve a high level of journeyman-like competence among a group of long service, capable soldiers. It had the added benefit of keeping them occupied and interested.¹⁰ Pre-war focus on large scale mobilization exercises gave way to sport, field exercises and elaborate

instruction at company level. All soldiers became skilled in the use of their company-level weapons. By design the Reichswehr was a Führerarmee, or "leaders army" - every soldier was expected to be able to fill the boots of his leaders. And they did, for in WW II privates became first sergeants and sergeants were promoted to officers and commanded companies and battalions. In short, they hired good people and invested in them. But at every opportunity the Reichswehr also sought to bring into its ranks, for about three months, "illegal" volunteers ("Zweitfreiwillige") for training. The Reichswehr was designed to be a long term service by the Allies but the German General Staff tried to build the national military reserve at every opportunity by early discharges, short service training courses in contravention to Treaty terms, and encouragement, training and material assistance for paramilitary formations.

The Military Academy had been abolished and opportunities for officer training much reduced. Consequently, divisions carried on higher level training by special courses, war games, and written exercises. Staff officers routinely performed historical staff studies for instructional purpose. Those studies performed at Army Staff level accurately analyzed many tactical and operational issues growing out of the experiences of WW I; they were instructive to both von Seeckt and to the staff officers who performed the studies and who later, as senior officers, built battlefield victories based upon their lessons.

Among these findings was confirmation of the outstanding WW I performance of small but remarkably efficient staffs of armies, corps, and divisions. Likewise, German troop units at all levels consistently performed well. German thinking focused on the operational and tactical rather than strategical levels. In particular, these examinations noted the success of the Hutier tactics applied so effectively towards the end of the World War and confirmed in many German officers the belief that modern warfare demanded mobility and that only small armies could be mobile. Such was the beginnings of tactical and doctrinal concepts that would come to maturity in another twenty years. These studies began immediately after the evacuation of the Rhineland and seem to have contributed much to the education of high ranking commanders and staffs of the German Army of World War II.

Simulations made up for lack of Reichwehr equipment: Officers made extensive use of map exercises. Trucks and dummy weapons simulated tanks and artillery. As early as 1921 the Germans ran an exercise in the Harz Mountains with motorized infantry in lorries. "Doctrine and force structure evolved from these insights. Three divisions of cavalry, considered by the Allies to have little value in modern war, were permitted the Reichwehr. Von Seeckt also trained them as artillerymen. These cavalry divisions also formed an organizational nucleus for new ideas. Among many innovations of the times, they came to include a motorized infantry battalion, a cyclist

battalion, armored automobiles, several squadrons of heavy machine guns, and motorized artillery. The Reichswehr constantly experimented for their staff studies had convinced them that they had to find a way to avoid positional warfare.

Von Seeckt sought help from the East, too. The Prussians had a long history of dealing with the Czar's army dating back to 1812. Since the Western Allies, and particularly France and Great Britain, were dictating postwar terms, it made sense for the Reichswehr to again turn to that outcast of the times, revolutionary Russia. In 1926 twenty-five German officers went to Russia: 14 to attend training schools, and others to maneuvers, for experiments with poison gas, to learn Russian. (Similarly, thirteen Russians went to Germany.) They set up a joint tank school and financed a German flying base in 1924 at Lipetsk with fighter aircraft purchased from the Fokker works in Holland with hidden funds from a so-called "Ruhr Fund". Guarded by the Russians, aerodrome instructors trained German fighter pilots, observers, tested aeroplanes, made technical experiments, and collected experience for a future German Air Force. The firm of Krupp obtained a stockholder interest in the Swedish armaments firm of Bofors and was thus able to expose many of its engineers and technicians to practical work and testing in Sweden. Naturally German army officers observed and participated on occasion. The Reichswehr did not neglect its technical and industrial base. Germans also established three Krupp artillery shell factories in Russia; some of their output was sent back to

Germany. They established a Junkers aircraft factory at Fili, near Moscow, and a poison gas factory at Samara.¹² This German-Soviet cooperation continued until Hitler came to power. Industrial specialists joined German military staffs and businessmen and soldiers cooperated to establish "black" production centers within the Reich itself. Meanwhile, the Navy conducted experiments with civilian speed boats, established a clandestine submarine design and construction office in The Hague, and helped build and test at sea submarines for others at Rotterdam and in Spain. Admiral Canaris, subsequent intelligence chief, was deeply involved in these matters. In short, German officers did a lot of thinking, planning, experimenting, training, and learning between the two world wars.

This was the Reichswehr of the 1920s. It was an inward-looking Army focusing on developing its human resources as a Führerarmee, so that in better days it might gradually expand to two or three times its original size. A French writer accused von Seeckt of trying to create a grand Army in miniature - a truth, for the Reichswehr had to contain in embryo more or less all the elements of such an Army.¹³ Its focus was on people, followed by doctrine, designed to create an army able to return mobility and decision to the battlefield. Tanks, and other tools of the Blitzkrieg, came later.

What are the opportunities for the American Army of 1986 in light of this experience? First, like the Reichswehr, we are getting first-rate quality soldiers. USAREC needs the resources to keep them

coming. We're getting enough willing, intelligent soldiers to make a full investment in our human material. Today's soldiers can master the tradecraft if given the time, ammunition, and fuel to do so. We almost have the ingredients for a Führerarmee - a leaders army. But we cannot do it with ALO 2 units, over-equipped in typical American fashion, for the overhead will continue to drag. And soldiers don't really learn much in the REFORGERS of their lives. Senior leaders, maybe, but not soldiers. So emphasize soldier training at company level.

Secondly, the Reichswehr spent considerable time and effort in formal training for its noncommissioned officers. Surely its strange that the American Army has come so lately to see the need for progressive, formal schooling. After all, we've had an officer development program for almost a century. Fortunately, such programs have recently taken root and will, hopefully, survive and prosper.

Third, officer programs have been long institutionalized, but the currency was debased in the 1970s. We didn't get the best and the brightest. Army standards, leaders and their men, fell short. We didn't have public support. Standards were relaxed in order to meet number and affirmative action goals. But times are changing. USMA and ROTC programs are well subscribed. We can afford to be short a few more officers too, if necessary. So now is the time to improve the quality and lengthen the formal training programs of our officer corps as we

improve accession quality. The current focus on troop duty also helps but it's doubly important that those officers most capable, and especially those who might be expected to rise to general officer, receive a full measure of troop experience. We need a renewed vigor in officer programs to balance the new quality of our enlistment successes.

The Reichswehr focused on getting the best possible officer and enlisted human material. Then it spared no effort and no investment in developing officers and soldiers individually. Most training was done in fully manned though modestly equipped companies, battalions and regiments. Officers studied, observed, and practiced extensively within a rigorous and traditional Prussian, professional development program. Noncommissioned officers and soldiers learned their tradecraft through extensive and long-term, hands-on training within their companies. Within a half dozen years they were a Führerarmee. We might be able to do the same.

FOOTNOTES

1. Larry Addington, The Blitzkrieg Era and the German General Staff, 1865-1941, p. 38.
2. Walter Goerlitz, History of the German General Staff, 1653 - 1945, p. 223.
3. General F. Culmann, Reichsheer and Militias: Their Structures and Strategical Employment, p. 8.
4. Herbert Rosinski, The German Army, pp. 183-186.
5. Rosinski, p. 188.
6. Rosinski, p. 182.
7. Culmann, pp. 14-15.
8. Goerlitz, p. 227.
9. Martin van Crevald, Fighting Power: German Military Performance 1914-1945, pp. 171-173.
10. Rosinski, pp. 188-189.
11. Goerlitz, p. 223.
12. F. L. Carsten, The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918 to 1933, pp. 236-242.
13. Goerlitz, p. 223.